

Ovid's *Bacchae*: a poetic metamorphosis

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Pentheus, king of Thebes, dominates the last third of book 3 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, coming to a bloody end for resisting the new god Bacchus, often called Liber in Roman poetry. Divine justice brutally punishes mortal hybris or arrogance in this macabre replay of Euripides' *Bacchae*.

Fear of the foreign: fear of the new

Reminiscent of some modern politicians, Pentheus is characterized by xenophobia and suspicion of foreign religions. His zealous opposition to Bacchus as an outsider conceals the fact that he was himself of recent immigrant stock: his grandfather Cadmus had settled in Thebes having fled from Tyre in Phoenicia. While the Romans were in fact quite receptive to new gods as long as their rites were carefully regulated in accordance with ancestral custom, Pentheus' hostility to Bacchus picks up on a typically Roman prejudice about the dangers of Greek and Eastern influence. Bacchus' is a complex case: on the one hand the Roman Senate had clamped down severely on the worship of the Bacchanalia in 186 B.C., and sure enough some of the arguments against the cult reported by Livy are used by Pentheus; on the other hand, Bacchus' mother was Semele, a Theban princess and Pentheus' aunt, and so Pentheus actually rejects one of his own in opposing the ritual reintegration of his own cousin.

Pentheus' speech against Bacchus is similarly structured around a contrast between the depraved easterner and the hardy native Thebans. Those stalwart veterans who overcame the perils of war are now distracted by the brassy melodies and seductive finery of Dionysian cult, their heads covered in garlands rather than by helmets, and – worst of all – overcome by a timid young man in purple and gold whose hair is dripping with perfume. The king's rant tips over into a parody of local pride as he expresses a cartoon version of the Theban foundation legend: 'Remember, I beg you, that you are sprung from the serpent, and recapture something of his spirit to defend your reputation!'

Reinventing Pentheus' story

Ovid's Pentheus is based substantially on

Euripides' Pentheus, and his provocative taunt that the rites have been fabricated (558 *commentaque sacra*) echoes a very similar phrase in the *Bacchae* (218). But he also echoes motifs from the mouths of characters in Virgil's *Aeneid*, mostly Italians opposed to the arrival of Aeneas and the Trojans, such as Turnus, Numanus Remulus, and Mezentius. With irreverent humour, Ovid pokes fun at how Virgil's characters had formulated their sense of national identity by deriding the foreign ways which they wished to avoid. In the end, Pentheus will be drawn into spying on the Bacchic rites, more interested in them than he would have cared to admit.

The centrepiece of Euripides' *Bacchae* is a series of manipulative conversations between Pentheus and the disguised Dionysus. These result in Dionysus persuading Pentheus to accompany him to Mount Cithaeron to spy on the maenads. Ovid has replaced these exchanges with an embedded eyewitness account delivered by an internal narrator, Acoetes' story of how the Etruscan mariners took Bacchus captive, a story that is familiar from the seventh Homeric hymn to Dionysus. Ovid then concludes the book by returning to the plot of Euripides' *Bacchae*, giving his Pentheus episode an A–B–A structure. It is typical of Ovid's allusive artistry to weave together two poetic sources in a way that suggests connections between them.

Acoetes' tale and the sea-god Dionysus

Acoetes tells an amusingly self-exculpating tale. His voice is one of the many in the *Metamorphoses* to emphasize divine power and the importance of respecting the gods. While his main aim is to explain how he became a devotee of Bacchus, he builds up a strong moral contrast between his own pious recognition of the spark of divinity in the boy Dionysus and the evil of his shipmates with their criminal pasts.

The pirates in turn disparage Acoetes' advice to respect the mysterious boy, and eventually overcome him. Acoetes is freed of any responsibility for holding the god to ransom.

During this story there is a subtle hint that Acoetes could be Dionysus in disguise. 'There is no god more present than he is,' says Acoetes to Pentheus, as he reports the god's epiphany: the ship stalls in the water and becomes overgrown with vines and ivy; the god himself appears to brandish a thyrsus and marshals phantom lynxes, tigers and panthers. The pirates are terrified and jump overboard. They are punished for their impiety by being turned into sea creatures, and Ovid describes how they grow scales, fins, or a tail. Once metamorphosed, they gambol about like a chorus (685), perhaps in allusion to tragic choruses that dance in honour of Dionysus. The god's reward is that Acoetes is the only one of the crew of twenty or so to retain his human form.

Blindness and vision

Pentheus is wilfully blind to the moral lessons of Acoetes' story. He angrily imprisons his captive and orders his death by torture. Equally he fails to heed the evidence of the prison doors spontaneously opening, and the chains magically falling from Acoetes' arms. Pentheus' blindness is part of a wider theme of blindness and insight, vision and spectatorship, which runs throughout book 3 of the *Metamorphoses*. The visual theme, also prominent in Euripides' *Bacchae*, is made explicit in a theatrical simile near the start of the book, but it encompasses also Narcissus' fascination with his own reflection. Earlier in the book it is established that even though Tiresias is blind, he enjoys the gift of prophecy and inner vision. Nonetheless, Pentheus mocks him for his blindness, and Tiresias replies: 'How happy you would be if you too were devoid of this light of vision; that way you would not see the Bacchic rites.'

Appropriately enough, then, the punishment of Pentheus is visually charged. Every story in the *Metamorphoses* concludes in a transformation of some kind. While in Acoetes'

tale, the transformation of men into sea-creatures was physically visible and described in detail, the transformation in the Pentheus story is brought about in perceptual terms, a clever twist on the more common physical metamorphosis. Bacchus is the god of illusions, and Bacchic madness makes Agave see her son Pentheus as a beast of prey, and so she and her sisters hunt him down and rip him apart in a perverted ritual of Dionysian *sparagmos*, a live dismemberment in honour of the god.

The killing of Pentheus takes place in a clearing which is visible from all sides (709 *spectabilis undique campus*). His mother is the first to see him spying on the rites with profane eyes, but instead of recognizing him as her son, she sees a wild boar, and calls upon her sisters to join her in hunting him down. The stage is set for an extraordinary spectacle.

Ripping off Euripides

Tiresias had prophesied to Pentheus that unless he paid due homage to Dionysus, he would be torn apart and would bespatter the woods, his mother, and his aunts with blood. The word for ‘you will be torn apart’ is *spargere*, which evokes the Greek *sparagmos*. Undoubtedly, the killing of Pentheus is the emotional climax of Euripides’ *Bacchae*, and it seems that, as so often in tragedy, the divine justice has been disproportionate to the human error being punished. Accordingly the reader might experience on Pentheus’ behalf the pity and fear, which Aristotle identifies in the *Poetics* as classic responses to tragedy.

By contrast, Ovid treats the *sparagmos* with levity that borders on the glib. Pentheus’ aunt Autonoe rips off his right arm; his other aunt Ino rips off the left; Pentheus would have held out his hands to supplicate his mother, but he didn’t have any! When he shows her his bloody trunk instead, Agave howls and rips off his head. Ovid’s darkly comic dilution of the tragic tone may be a response to the gravity of scenes involving Dionysian madness in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, a very different and more tragic kind of epic.

Ovid’s Pentheus story gives us a very good sense of the place which Dionysus–Bacchus held in the ancient Roman imagination, cutting across the spheres of poetry and myth, religion, and politics. Wall painting from Pompeii and other visual arts attest to the Italians’ fascination with the god of tragedy and wine, who was dangerous and alluring in equal measure. If the story of Pentheus is a cautionary tale of misguided autocracy, Ovid suggests that while humans may try to resist Dionysus, the god will always triumph in the end.

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